

THE
KENNETH & HELEN SPENCER
ART REFERENCE LIBRARY

GIVEN TO COMPLEMENT THE
NELSON GALLERY COLLECTIONS
1962

ART REFERENCE LIBRARY

1962-1978

FOR A NUMBER of years visitors to the curatorial wing on the ground floor of the Gallery cannot but have been aware of the plethora of books. The curatorial offices were jammed with them; they overflowed from a small, inadequate stack room and stretched down every corridor. These books and periodicals have become a real necessity for Gallery operations. In developing the collections, the curators were charged with the heavy responsibility of acquiring works of art and the department of education charged with interpreting the collections to the public, making them enjoyable and meaningful. Publications about the arts by knowledgeable writers over several centuries have produced a vast literature on every phase of the arts both Occidental and Oriental. Without at least a minimal library of the best and standard works, the curators were seriously hampered in making valid and significant acquisitions, and the staff was incapable of supplying sound and lucid interpretations of the collection for the public and scholars alike.

The history of the library is a fascinating story, too long to be detailed in this brief notice. A modest grant from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1937 enabled the Oriental Department to acquire some of the basic books and catalogues, most of which are unobtainable today. Development was erratic and depressingly slow. After the interruption of the war years, a notable gift was the large John Bender library on prints and drawings which came to the Gallery in 1959. It contains invaluable reference material on all aspects of these arts, many of extreme rarity today. However, aside from this great gift, the acquisition of books could not be described as an active and vigorous program. Even so, the Gallery holdings had outgrown their original quarters in what is now the Children's Library. Funds from the Friends of Art, acquired through the Maria Callas benefit concert, made it possible to move the library into the former educational offices in the southwest corner of the ground floor.

The year 1962 has been selected as the real founding year of the art reference library. It was in that year that Mrs. Kenneth A. Spencer gave a substantial sum for the acquisition of books, a gift followed a few years later by a like sum from the same donor. Subsequent to this, helpful grants came from the Kress Foundation and the Charles E. Merrill Trust. Now for the first time the librarian and curatorial staff were able to form an acquisition policy and a planned development.

But welcome and healthy growth brought a new and vexing problem—lack of space. Books and periodicals must be shelved in an orderly manner if they are to be of any use at all. Every available space was pressed into use, mainly the curatorial offices and the broad corridors. The arrangement was far from ideal. Many rare volumes, now unobtainable, were exposed in relatively public areas—not the best example of museum security—and locating a book often took as much ingenuity as patience. There were but two alternatives: either the library program must be drastically curtailed or new and really adequate housing must be found. The former option was untenable for an institution of the size and standing of the Nelson Gallery, and the latter choice posed grave and seemingly unsurmountable problems.

What was needed was a very large hole in the ground roofed over in a snug and substantial manner, with temperature and humidity control for the safety of the books. Clearly this was not an especially obvious or exciting project to interest a donor. To assume a project of this nature and extent required imagination, an understanding of essential needs and a willingness to help where help was needed most. Mrs. Kenneth A. Spencer, a most generous donor to the Gallery, grasped the urgency of the problem at once and the library was assured.

Mrs. Spencer entered with enthusiasm into all the details of the prolonged planning stage. Mr. Robert Jenks was selected as architect and construction was entrusted to the John Rohrer Construction Company. Ground was broken on the southwest terrace, opposite the Elmer Pierson Sculpture Garden, in July of 1977. During the following months, cranes and bulldozers worked at a huge excavation, the maximum size available space would allow. The result is an area of 8,470 square feet capable of accommodating some 60,000 volumes. The library at present comprises some 26,000 books and periodicals, so ample room for expansion over a number of years is assured. The Kress Foundation helpfully contributed matching funds for the all-important climatic control. These underground stacks are accessible by both staircase and elevator from the librarian's office.

Space for the shelving of books, while the major feature, is by no means the full extent of Mrs. Spencer's gift. There is a very well-designed central office, adjacent to the stack entrance, with a private office for the librarian, catalogue files, a service desk and area for the accession and cataloguing of books. Inasmuch as this is a reference library in contrast to a circulating library, a good reading room was essential. In the old arrangement no facilities were available for visitors and especially the number of college students served by the Gallery.

The reading room, adjacent to the librarian's office, brings a new and beautiful installation to the Gallery. Here Mrs. Spencer has exercised the taste, discrimination and attention to detail that characterize her many gifts to this whole area of the Midwest. The room features an important and deeply carved English mantel with a pair of matching corner

cupboards from the time of George II, about 1730. These splendid examples of English decorative arts were given the Gallery by Mrs. Spencer several years ago and are now installed for the first time. Fortunately these pieces retained their original color which has been matched in Georgian-style panelling throughout the room. The donor's gift also included the furniture for which Mrs. Spencer selected the design and which she commissioned to be made especially for the room. The reading tables and chairs are augmented by several 18th century pieces from Mrs. Spencer's own collection. Shelving is provided for all the necessary standard indexes, catalogues and reference works. The room is as functional as it is handsome.

To the left of the large, double doors leading to the reading room, is the name plaque. It is in gray slate from Monson, Maine, while the lettering was designed and cut by the John Stevens Shop, Newport, Rhode Island. It reads:

The
Kenneth and Helen Spencer
Art Reference Library
Given to Complement the
Nelson Gallery Collections
1962

With the recent completion of the Crowell wing, the Spencer Gallery for French impressionist painting and, now, all the facilities of a working reference library, the Nelson Gallery is a complete entity far better prepared than before to serve the curators, the educational department, concerned students and the public. It is certain that the community joins with the Trustees and staff of the Gallery in their gratitude to so providential a donor as Mrs. Spencer.

Laurence Sickman
Director Emeritus

A VERSATILE PATRON
OF THE
COLLECTIONS:
MRS. KENNETH A. SPENCER

THE NELSON GALLERY has been twice blessed in the development of its collections: first came the support of the Nelson Trust, composed of what remained after meeting yearly operating expenses—to which public and scholars owe the financing of most of our art acquisitions until 1972. The second blessing has come in the form of donors who have supported our quest for major purchases at a time when the specter of inflation, in combination with increased Gallery services and programs, has threatened to erode our position vis-a-vis the international art market.

Foremost among these welcome donors is Mrs. Kenneth A. Spencer. She uniquely perceived that our dwindling purchase funds could no longer compete with the acquisition programs mounted by other art museums both here and abroad. Though interested in the welfare of Kansas City from many points of view, she feels that cultural enrichment of the community through the Gallery is as important as that through universities, hospitals, youth and scientific organizations also enhanced by her munificence.

In her desire to enrich the artistic quality of community life, Mrs. Spencer likes to paraphrase the words of Edgar Degas, "for many art is a luxury but for me it is a necessity." It was fortunate for the community that this enlightened patron came along at a crucial point in the Nelson Gallery's development to accept the concept that art purchases were responsibilities increasingly beyond the capabilities of the Nelson Trust.

However great among the art museums of the world, the Nelson Gallery is still a young collection, still lacking paintings, prints, drawings by many important artists and sculptors. Where is our Medici porcelain or Delacroix painting?

A very short time ago one could have asked as well, "Where are our great examples of eighteenth century French furniture? Where is our major painting by Degas? Where is our Redon?" Thanks to Mrs. Spencer the Gallery visitor can see in our galleries one of the most significant works by Degas in this country, a Redon pastel that is a *sine qua non* of this artist's sensitivity toward flowers, and master works by the great French cabinet makers B.V.R.B. (Bernard II van Risenburgh) and Adam Weisweiler, who represent continental European furniture at its peak. Since no full figure sculpture from the period of France's high Gothic cathedrals belonged to the collections, she added the late 13th century wood Madonna and Child from the Artois/Picardy region to our medieval holdings in 1974. No other Gothic sculpture of this importance has since appeared on the market.

She has been as willing to purchase from strength when the opportunity has arisen: her quick determination to underwrite the Gallery's stellar acquisition of a number of pieces of Chinese furniture placed us in the first rank in that field outside China. Her gifts have been so catholic—including a number of English antiques from her own home, of which the Chippendale breakfront is the finest example in an American museum—that a check list has been appended in order better to inform our visitors of its extent. Mrs. Spencer has at times added to personal gifts by purchasing for the Gallery complementary objects. This process stands behind the acquisition of the pair of eighteenth

century console tables and mirrors attributed to Luke Lightfoot. No better examples of English painted furniture exist on this side of the Atlantic.

Perhaps the most memorable Spencer acquisition was the 1972 purchase from the Kenneth A. and Helen F. Spencer Foundation Art Acquisition Fund of Claude Monet's "Boulevard des Capucines." From a curatorial point of view this was a truly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—the kind of painting that sells in a day. Only a quick telephone call followed by an immediate day trip to New York City, saved it from the competition. One of the most beautiful paintings of 19th century Paris (in my opinion one of the two most beautiful among many), Monet's picture remains a landmark in the development of French Impressionist technique. It remains equally a landmark in the history of the Gallery.

The spirit in which that great painting was received is preserved in many letters sent to Mrs. Spencer and to the museum. Here is an excerpt of one received from Richard Hollander. "It's hard to locate the exact words to congratulate you on the Monet. It isn't just a fine painting. It's one I know I could never come to the end of. I expect to visit it often as I do the Rembrandt, and words will never do to describe it. It's got its own language." Remembering the Gallery's importance to the region, it is appropriate to cite the significance that acquisition had for a University of Kansas art historian: "It will be my great pleasure to expose my students (all eighty of them) to this radiant example of Impressionism on a Gallery tour."

No less important was the companion acquisition made in 1973 of Degas' *La Répétition de Ballet*. At that time, William Ittmann, Jr. wrote "I have read via the *New York Times* of your wonderful gift to the Nelson of the Degas pastel from Mrs. Havemeyer's collection. I can't tell you how much it means to me even though I live far away and am not there now, to see the Degas—that your generosity has made this grand work of art available to everyone who comes to Kansas City. It was an historic purchase for the Gallery, as it is probably the first work of art Degas ever sold to an American (except whatever

Mary Cassatt may have acquired from him at that point) collector, so it is a great stroke of good fortune that it has finally come to rest in a wonderful U.S. collection!"

It might be added that only by the sheerest of luck was this picture not exported to Japan. Thus a great document in the history of American collecting was saved for the national patrimony by a donor's generosity.

Paramount in this philosophy of giving is the desire that gifts will inspire similar acts on the part of others. In the case of the Nelson Gallery this has indeed happened. One need only cite the recent anonymous gifts of Gauguin's "Paysan et Son Chien pres d'une Barriere" and Mary Cassatt's pastel of her sister Lydia at the Paris Opera, to prove that great gifts can encourage a pattern of expanded donation following creatively in the wake of those who take the first quint-essential step.

There is an appropriate symmetry to Mrs. Spencer's Nelson Gallery gifts. They began with the donation for the purchase of art books in 1962—a sign that a library would be an integral part of this art gallery's total ambience. That idea comes full circle in the dedication of a complete library facility to house The Kenneth and Helen Spencer Art Reference Library. Such munificence is not only an assurance that the Gallery's intellectual stance will continue to be a positive one, it is also an inspiration for those who have worked closely with Helen Spencer.

A dear friend of Mrs. Spencer, Mrs. Donald F. Hyde, owner of the Hyde 18th century collection of Samuel Johnson and his Circle at Four Oaks Farm, wrote to her in a way that parallels our own feelings "I may be called a 'Johnsonian' but what I am really is an avid and devoted 'Spensonian'."

Ralph T. Coe
Director

GIFTS FROM
HELEN FORESMAN SPENCER
TO THE
NELSON GALLERY COLLECTION.

Gifts from Helen Foresman Spencer to the Nelson Gallery collection.

Items marked with an asterisk (*) were given through the Kenneth A. and Helen F. Spencer Foundation Acquisition Fund.

ENGLISH FURNITURE

Pair of console tables and mirrors attributed to Luke Lightfoot, ca. 1760. *

Queen Anne winged chair, ca. 1710. *

Pair of Chippendale gilded console tables and mirrors, ca. 1760. *

Chippendale mahogany secretary-bookcase, ca. 1755.

Set of four George I side chairs, ca. 1760.

Chippendale mahogany tea table, ca. 1760.

Pair of Chippendale "Gainesborough" arm chairs, ca. 1760, needle-point upholstery.

George I mahogany oval drop-leaf table, ca. 1725.

Queen Anne black lacquer drop-front desk, ca. 1710.

Pair of Chippendale "Gainsborough" arm chairs, ca. 1760, brocade upholstery.

FRENCH FURNITURE

Commode made by Adam Weisweiler, the mounts by Pierre Gouthière, ca. 1760. *

Lady's writing desk (Louis XV) by Bernard II van Risenburgh, ca. 1750. *

ITALIAN FURNITURE

Pair of shell chairs (Venetian), ca. 1775.

Long bench with twisted legs, yellow silk damask, 18th century. *

GERMAN FURNITURE

South German marquetry cabinet, ca. 1740. *

SPANISH FURNITURE

Pair of marble benches.

AMERICAN FURNITURE

Large conference table, 20th century.

ENGLISH DECORATIVE ARTS

Pair of carved and painted wood corner cupboards, ca. 1730. *
Now installed in the reading room of the art reference library.

Carved and painted wood mantel, ca. 1730, en suite with above. *
Now installed in the reading room of the art reference library.

Brass and iron basket grate for fireplace, Adam style, ca. 1770.

Embroidered (Stump work) picture of the "Adoration of the Magi," in original red lacquer frame, ca. 1670.

Embroidered (Stump work) chest, Charles II, ca. 1660.

Sheffield silver plate candelabrum, made by Mathew Boulton, ca. 1880.

FRENCH DECORATIVE ARTS

Pair of gilt bronze candle sconces, after model by L. F. Feuchère père, ca. 1770. *

Wallpaper panel, "Chasse de Compiègne" from the atelier of Jacquemart and Bernard.

Brocaded fabric, possibly French (Lyon), 20th century.

FRENCH SCULPTURE

Madonna and Child, ca. 1275. From Picardy, wood with traces of polychrome. *

Terracotta figures of a Shepherdess and a Bagpipe Player, 18th century. Gift in honor of the Westport Garden Club.

AMERICAN SCULPTURE

Seated Woman by Kahlil Gibran (born 1922). Given together with Mrs. DeVere Dierks through the Friends of Art. *

FRENCH PAINTING

"Boulevard des Capucines, Paris" by Claude Monet (1840-1926), 1873-74. *

"Ballet Rehearsal" by Edgar Degas (1834-1917), 1874. *

"Vase de Fleurs" by Odilon Redon (1840-1916), ca. 1912. *

AMERICAN PAINTING

"Dining Room Still Life" by John Koch (1909-1978). *

CHINESE FURNITURE

Pair of clothes and hat cupboards, solid camphor wood, *chang-mu*, Ming dynasty, 17th century. *

Chest, rosewood, *huang-hua-li* variety, Ming dynasty, 17th century. *

Table, rosewood, *huang-hua-li* variety, Ming dynasty, 17th century. *

Couch, rosewood, *huang-hua-li* variety, Ming dynasty, 1st half of 17th century, or earlier. *

Couch table, rosewood, *huang-hua-li* variety, Ming dynasty, 15th century. *

Pair of side tables, black reed with black lacquer top, Ming dynasty, 15th-17th century. *

Pair of cupboards, rosewood, *huang-hua-li* variety, for top and structural frame. Burlwood, for door panels; *nan-mu* for side panels, Ming dynasty, 16th century. *

Altar table, rosewood, *huang-hua-li* variety, Ming dynasty, early 15th century or earlier. *

CHINESE PAINTING

"Traveling among Rivers and Mountains," artist unknown, Chin dynasty, ca. 1200-20. *

CHINESE CERAMICS

Famille rose export porcelain bowl, 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ " dia., ca. 1785. *

Famille vert pair of porcelain plates, 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ " dia., ca. 1700.

Punch bowl, export porcelain, 23" dia., ca. 1790.

Pair of fatshan garden stools, 19th century.

Pair of elephant pedestals, 19th century.

Rectangular Chinese celadon bowl.

ORIENTAL CARPET

Oushak (Ushak) carpet, 11'10" x 14'5", ca. 1800. *



The Kenneth and Helen Spencer
Art Reference Library



READING ROOM.



EXCAVATION.

November 1977



October 25, 1978



EXCAVATION FOR STACKS.

November 1977



October 25, 1978



READING ROOM WITH GEORGE II CUPBOARDS
AND FIREPLACE.

April 10, 1978



October 25, 1978

Front cover design adapted from the original
sketch for the name plaque cut by The John
Stevens Shop, Newport, Rhode Island.



